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**DIASPORA.**  
**HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE DIASPORA**  
**PHENOMENON IN THE PARISH COMMUNITIES OF THE**  
**TRANSYLVANIAN REFORMED DIOCESE TILL 1940**

The present work aims at the analysis of those historical and social events, which helped the development of the Diaspora phenomenon connected with the Reformed parishes of the Transylvanian Diocese. This community may present a significant change concerning the demographic data as well as in the changing of the geographic and religious-ethnic space.

The first part of the thesis tries to interpret the notion of the Diaspora, which notion changed a lot during the centuries.

The notion was first formulated on the basis of decay of Salomon's reign in the Old Testament, other information from the Bible however show that before the first event of slavery in the history of the Jewish people, immigrants belonging to Israel formed communities in Egypt, and later in Babylon.

Israelite communities were formed later in Alexandria too, and in many other cities and regions which were important from a cultural and commercial point of view.

The word Diaspora is primarily connected to the notion of dissipation (alike seeds), but the meaning of the word of Greek origin changed in its essence, as its utilization in the Septuagint served to ameliorate the notion of *expulsion, molestation, exile*, as the slavery of Babylon used to be characterized by these notions. The following generations did not feel like characterizing this event with the original notions, the Septuagint used much softer expressions such as servitude, incarceration or exile.

Anyway, the notion Diaspora will be used in order to describe and characterize those communities, whose from various motifs came to live outside their original historical borders.

The usage of the notion later became very popular describing all those communities which live in other geographical zones than the original, including ethnical groups or religious minorities.

In the modern age those persons or groups were also included in this category which chose to migrate out of economical motifs, or persons with specific professions which stimulated migration.

The notion was at the beginning a theological one, later it became a notion connected to social and political sciences.

The dissemination of the notion in the Hungarian ecclesiastical terminology is first of all connected with the dissemination of the Reformation. Some currents in the

young Reformed church searched for the analogy between the history of the Jewish and Hungarian people in their strive to understand the historical fiasco at Mohács and the division of the country into three parts. Further historical events also gave occasions to take over the usage of the notion with its original meaning, the raw „galut” (banished, exiled), referring to the inhabitants of such regions which had to suffer a lot because of conflicts with Turks, Tartars, Habsburgs, later even Romanians or Russians, but even plagues which followed these unwanted events.

Consideration towards these suffering communities was of two types: they were either considered groups on the way of disparities, or a special hope was expressed towards them: as communities, they could play the role of the „seed”, being able to create a prosperous future in their surroundings.

In our days there are disputes connected to minority communities outside the Hungarian Reformed existence, but also inside this space about the delimitations where the notion Diaspora describes correctly the sort of existence of the community.

For the beginnings all who are implicated in such discussions agree that the notion has to be basically used for the communities formed in emigration, outside ethnic and confessional, and even national borders. The motivations of emigration are however being discussed: if they were voluntary or were caused by political, economical, ethnic, confessional etc. pressure.

Due to other opinions in those ethnic or religious communities which came to be minority and spread among a certain majority can be considered entities of Diaspora. The basic element in this case is the fact that they are dispersed in a small number, incapable to reproduce their cultural space on the basis of their own stanbies.

Others confer a pejorative nuance to the notion only because they are being catalogated as an inferior group. Then there are opinions that ethnic or confessional islands presenting a majority in their region, even if they are minorities, should not be considered communities of Diaspora.

In the second part of the thesis the history of the Jewish people is being briefly presented, with major accent on the process of the formation of their religious identity.

Those stages are being run over which meant a specific journey, first of all through Abraham, the first who let himself led by a command from God, left his aboriginal land, went to an unknown place described only in promises.

Wandering among the people he gradually forms those specific elements which are going to characterize those who belong to him, the most significant elements being given to him at the moment when he is the first time named a „Hebrew” and receives the blessing of Melchisedec. Even if they are described as „Jewish people”, they auto define as „the sons of Israel”.

The specific sign of the people got through Abraham – the circumcision – confers them a special identity in the interrelation with other people. This sign is more than a commonsense: the consciousness that they belong to each other and to God.

However it is interesting that some relationships are also being formed with Semite peoples, such as Moab, Ammon or Edom, or the tribe of the Midianites (in fact a tribe of Arab origin). The decisive element in the early identity is however the one connected to Abraham, through the formula „My ancestor was a roaming Aram”, which acquires a remarkable accent through the fact that it defines his identity as a newcomer. This auto definition becomes an early formula of confession expressing the connection with God.

Yet, we cannot neglect some relevant episodes of the history and identity of the people of Israel: we should observe the tight relation between God and certain persons of the community. The idea that at all ceremonies which claimed an oath, all the leaders of the tribe swore in the name of God, God of the fathers, in fact shows a very personal relationship. In the mean time among Semite people it was a popular custom that between the leader of the tribe and the God of the community there was a personal relationship perceived as a contract. The fact that God is often being named as Father, sometimes even replaced with the name of God: Abiezer-Eliezer, Abimelek-Elimelek, Abiram-Jhoram etc., in these formulas they not only mark persons and names, but are in fact expressions of the community between God and man, but can be even perceived as formulas of creed and confession.

A special form of relationship is offered in the events that occur in Egypt in the life of the Jewish people. The sons of Jacob do not only migrate to Egypt, but spend a lot of time there. This environment offers them other interesting elements of identity: Egypt becomes the symbol of welfare due to the rise of Joseph to the highest levels of social and political rank. Egypt is the place where during the seven years of hunger not only the family of Joseph, but significant parts of the people migrate to Egypt, live

well, are not only tolerated, but also respected, having possibilities to preserve their customs.

The cohabitation in Egypt has some other cultural effects: integration, assimilation of the Jews manifested by the usage of Egyptian names or some signs of religious syncretism.

However good their fortune might be, Joseph does not consider his life in Egypt should last forever, saying that Israel cannot stay in a foreign land and that they had to return to their own land, being visited and led by God of the ancestors.

The unlucky experienced later in Egypt pushed the people of Israel not only towards a moral and cultural degradation, but towards a physical extermination. The process through which from an almost annihilated people, under the leading of God through Moses, they start again to be a vivid people due to the Decalogue, however not defined by ethnicity, but by their relationship with God. This relationship has however large oscillations, often described as treason of God.

The development of the cult and society of Israel which culminates in the formation of the reign, the building of the church and the promotion of a regulated cultic life and well-defined liturgy lifts the Israelites from other people, confers them a special culture, religion: this means certain superiority and make them seem curious in comparison with other people. And when they make contact with other people, they usually depart from the cult of Jahve, injuring God.

But the Jewish people also assimilated some minor ethnic groups and small people during the process of formation, meanwhile they clarified the idea that Jahve had chosen them from the very beginning, so all the historical events happened from the will and personal guidance of God and that the future as well is traced on the plans of God.

Throughout a series of social transformation (starting with the institution of the judges and continuing with the kings) many conceptions connected to religion and cult also suffered changes. This development came true through a succession of alliance from the mercy and initiative of God. After the building of the church, the basis of the relationship with God changed profoundly: all hopes were connected to the holy town, Jerusalem and to the expectations that from the house of David the Promised will rise and persist forever.

The relationship between cult and state had also dangers concerning the relationship with God: the more the alliance through the royal house was being

accentuated, the real content of the alliance of Sinai was being forgotten. Besides God was expected to protect the land in any condition, and whenever the state lost or was occupied, Jahve was the one blamed of inobservance of the alliance and promises to his people.

At the end of the reign of Salomon the state divided into two parts as well as the relationship of the two entities with their tradition and with the ideas connected to the formation of the future. The northern part wished a tribal independence, while the southern part remained adepts of the reign. Conflicts appear concerning the cult (the church being in Juda, in Israel two cultic places will be founded and a new cult is being introduced in the state).

In this new cult some older elements appear which are from inherited Moses. Tjis meant some sort of return into the past: a reform which did not introduce new elements, but a return towards the values of the past.

In Juda another tendency developed: foreigners living in the royal court bring new influences and are familiar with the Jahve-cult. They have nothing to do with the tradition of the covenant or the events in Egypt or in the bleakness, i.e. for them this cult is strange. They are the people of palaces, wealth and not those of the bleakness, therefore they search for common points neither by protection of the values of the past through collective memory of the past events. In their cult they attach to other gods, other forms of connection with the divine, disseminating heathen pagan rites; masses attached to tradition are disappointed and indignant because of the new elite.

To this chapter we find a new and interesting interpretation by prof. Komoroczy, who argues that by this cultural opening of the successors of Salomon they just managed to integrate the Israelian people among other people, and they also preserved their cultural, financial and religious independence. Moreover, they promoted their people as a political and economical power in the region.

On the other hand the prophet Elijah must be seen and respected as a charismatic person, faithful to God, however it is worth considering the fact that his national and confessional fundamentalism might be a reason for the later decline of the country.

Elijah is in fact not blinded by the existence of foreigners (see his relationship with the widow of Sarepta), but is annoyed because the national tradition is being shadowed by foreign culture. This is the reason why he threatens with death all those who leave – i.e. betray – the tradition.

It is perceived as a national fiasco that after the decay of Israel the cult is being preserved by Juda, which being weaker, underdeveloped, under the continuous threat of the Egyptians retreated into a severe (self)isolation, closing themselves into the jail of national tradition.

The next step is the Assyrian expansion and the real Diaspora existence of the country. The most tragic element of these events is the fact that the intellectuals and rich strata are taken to exile, and those who remain at home have no leaders starting to degrade, to lose their identity, to assimilate. Those who were taken away from home face the same problems, but in a different ethnic and religious context.

After the exile is over a part of the people return home, but it is hard for them to find a common voice with those at home. The cultural differences makes it difficult to shape a people in common. The endeavoring to find the values of the past fail when they shove off the religious values received from Jahve. It is only a formal connection between God and people able to rebuild the connections between people.

Meanwhile the theological thinking develops: as a new confession the fact is formulated that the promises of Jahve given to David do not oblige Him to defend Israel in all conditions: the future cannot be based upon such wrong ideas. It is the people which has obligations: to obey the rules and watch the purity of cult.

Important changes occur in the religious thinking and practice: Jeremiah may be considered the prophet of the cult without sacrifice through the fact that he stresses the interior purity instead of ceremonies of sacrifice. Ezekiel absolves the people from the sins of the ancestors arguing that every generation will be judged by Jahve for his own sins.

A new form with new elements of faith is delineating: the true relationship with Jahve does not depend on the cult or temple, but on the true faith and pure heart.

The exile, the Diaspora situation are also interpreted in a different way: through the voice of the prophet who promulgates that „They will buy houses, fields and vine in this land.”

In this way a newly based identity of the Israeli people is built, not based on ethnic, political or cultural elements, but on religious ones: they belong to Jahve as long as they remain connected to His laws and values.

Meanwhile we can say that the Diaspora existence of the Jewish people had also many benefits. In different cities they created centers of excellence for the study of the

sacred books (Mishna), they learned to adapt to uncommon or strange conditions. Last but not least they were able to develop specific colonies based on their own religious and cultural values.

### **Chapters of the formation process of the Reformed Diaspora**

In the history of Reformed communities the Diaspora phenomenon has two interesting aspects. One of them is connected to the period of the early protestant reform, when the existence of *Diaspora* meant the hope linked to the dissemination of the seed which was expected to bring good harvest. Reformation spread put quickly and in a short time became the dominant confession in Transylvania.

Due to tragic historical events though the Diaspora phenomenon regained its old meaning: the one gained in the Old Testament associated with slavery, exile, degradation. This degradation partly went on in Transylvania, partly an ethnic and religious Diaspora was formed: many dispersed beyond the Carpathians getting into a different environment from both ethnic and religious point of view.

The Diaspora life of the Hungarians of Transylvania was quite different from the one of the Jews: the latter were unified from a religious aspect, but the Hungarians were divided into more denominational groups.

#### **Diaspora beyond the Carpathians**

In Moldova there was an important and numerous group of minorities, the csangos. Some sources present them as a population that had stayed there since the settlement of the Hungarians, others view them as a group that chose exile from early times. We consider them important because they serve as target communities for those persons who search for their existence in migration beyond Transylvania. They are motors of intercultural relationships. In those parts where these relationships were intensive, memberships often changed, and resulted in complex identities.

#### **The Catholic community of the csangos**

18th century sources witness that migration from Transylvania to Moldova was not always an individual decision: often whole groups chose to wander. In 1746 the

Catholic priest Zöld Péter transcended the Carpathians as the leader of a village community, and in Moldova he found a considerable number of communities: 9 great Catholic parishes and other 62 village communities inhabited by Hungarians. 100 years later a Franciscan monk notes that in Moldova he found 15 Catholic parishes, 70 branches and around 40-50000 Hungarian speaking persons.

Research tried to understand the motifs of these migrations and the factors which favoured their assimilation. Emigrants had short-time plans: that of collecting better income. In Moldova these emigrants were not looked at as enemies: they were respected for their industry.

From the very beginning the phenomenon of assimilation appeared due to mixed marriages, mostly among protestant immigrants, whom nobody tried to integrate and help to live out their own confession.

#### History and basic motifs of migration

The first emigrants arrived in Moldova before Reformation: people escaped there after the rebellion of George Dózsa, and documents testify the presence of Hungarian mercenaries, even Protestants, in the employment of the ruler in Iași in 1646. Hundreds of Szeklers are forced to leave their homes after the armed conflict and victimization of Mary Theresa. Other groups flee from epidemics or hunger.

The victimization after the revolution of 1848–49 is an important historical moment: many persons followed by the Habsburg officialities feel like searching safety beyond the Carpathians.

#### **The first Reformed communities beyond the Carpathians**

In Moldova, in Sascut was first formed a Hussite (Saxon) community, and around 1718 because of famine a whole Szekler village under the leadership of the Reformed priest established in Sascut, increasing the number of Protestants. Their existence was not being mentioned until 1858, when a traveler (later Reformed priest in Bucharest) discovered them.

In the nearby village Prala was also partly inhabited by Protestants, and the third village is Vișonta, with a Reformed community persisting until 1858.

In Bucharest in 1690 a land near Fântâna Boului was bought: here a first building was raised to serve as Protestant place of cult. Later it came into the possession of Lutherans coming from Transylvania and was alternatively used with Reformed communities until 1814, when the first Reformed priest came and started to build an own church on a plot bought from prince Iordache Filipescu. Later many priests served in Bucharest, founded their own confessional school for Reformed Hungarian speaking children.

Other Reformed communities were organized in Pitești, Ploiești, Craiova.

During the 19th century in the parent state becomes interested in the communities beyond the Carpathians, trying to sustain them financially, and trying to help them preserve their religious, cultural, confessional identity.

After 1860 the Reformed priest Márton Czelder offers himself as pastor of all those outside the borders. Due to conflicts with his colleague in Bucharest, Ferenc Koós, this plan cannot be fulfilled completely.

Czelder organized almost all Reformed communities formulating a statute considering their special needs as well as the laws of the Reformed church. Later on he traveled to Constantinople to find all Reformed people, he was surprised to find that the sultan was very tolerant towards the Christians.

After returning to the Romanian land he tried to unify the Reformed parishes into an episcopate with seat in Bucharest: partly independent from the Reformed church in the parent land. This endeavor however was not completely successful: in Bucharest it did not become enough support and in Transylvania and Hungary was rejected. After a long series of conflicts Czelder was considered to be guilty, and later consultations do not bring a solution either.

The mission was finally subordinated to the Reformed Episcopate of Transylvania and a deanery was organized with the seat in Bucharest.

In the history of the mission wavering periods came. It is being estimated that Hungarian population in Moldova and Wallachia was around 200000 persons, out of who more than 50000 were Reformed. Many of them assimilated to the majoritary population.

Nowadays despite the existence of Reformed parishes, due to the small number of the parishioners, their state must be named Diaspora.

## **Historical conditions for the development of the Diaspora phenomenon among Reformed communities in Transylvania**

When analyzing the causes which led to the development of the Diaspora phenomenon in Transylvania we have to take into account hostile forces outside the Hungarian nation as well as the Hungarian nationalism. Besides the fact that the Hungarian generation of the first half of the 19th century promoted the idea that Hungary should come off the Austrian Empire and form an independent state, these politicians did not succeed in thinking on a large scale in connection with the Romanian population: Romanian wishes for larger national rights were often neglected out of an ethnocentric view.

### **Ethnical situation in Transylvania from the beginning of the 16th century**

In this chapter I want to follow those social events through which the Hungarian population, especially the Reformed, became minority.

Around 1600 Transylvania several times became the scene of fights, wars, epidemics which destroyed a part of the population.

In the center of Transylvania (mainly Dobâca, Șieu valley, the triangle Bistrița-Cluj-Tg-Mureș) a demographic vacuum formed and was filled with immigrant masses coming from other zones.

We also have to mention the unfortunate conflict between Hungarian nobles and the peasants of Avram Iancu: as a consequence an important part of the population in zona Abrud, Zlatna, Vințu de Jos, Aiud, Ighiu etc. disappeared. During the 1848–49 revolution neither the Romanian, nor the Hungarian part was able to form a common front; the Hungarian population had no more demographic reserves, so they reached the situation of Diaspora. Many immigrated to the Ottoman Empire.

If the 19th century may be considered one of Romanian suffering, the 20th was the period of Hungarian suffering. Each part considered that *the other* is the cause of all failures. During the First World War finally Hungarians and Romanians found themselves at opposite sides: Romanians as winners, Hungarians as defended. The Hungarian political class tried to save national causes, but it was clear that the Romanians chose another way: to form their own nation and national state; they

succeeded in forming an alliance with the Saxons in Transylvania who supported the idea of union with the other Romanian principalities, framing Great Romania.

### **1. dec. 1918 historical border for the Hungarians in Transylvania**

Hungarians in Transylvania became a minority, and the unification document from Alba-Iulia involves a series of rights (complete national liberty, possibility to study, judge, administer in their own language, representation in the parliament, confessional autonomy) which were to guarantee the future of the Hungarians.

As Hungarian authorities before the union were not able to understand the aspiration of the Romanian population, neither was able the new Romanian government to transcend the traumas of the past. So, instead of a historical conciliation the nationalist competition continued.

The instauration of the Romanian authorities was not without victims, the old administration was completely changed, and therefore many lost their job, having no other choice but emigration. Between 1918 and 1924 around 200000 persons left the region, later waves also following – a fact that had negative effects upon the Hungarian population. Not only person, but institutions also lost their safety; institutions which were meant to maintain and develop Hungarian and Reformed religious and cultural life. Schools, parishes, cultural foundations, civil associations suffered a lot because of expropriations of agricultural plots, forests.

Signs were to be seen that official policy does not only want the great national union, but aims to homogenize ethnically and religiously the population. Laws concerning citizenship, usage of names, culture and education show intolerance and the clear wish of the assimilation of other cultures and values.

### **Diaspora in the center of attention**

Due to unfavorable political and social tendencies a series of Reformed communities went the way of degradation. Therefore the interest towards the Diaspora communities rises: it is all about communities which do not migrate, but are imperiled. Under these conditions persons and researchers try to describe these communities and

work out some common strategies to save them from extinction. It is obvious that the Diaspora phenomenon moved to Transylvania from beyond the Carpathians.

### **Parish life and Diaspora community – Diaspora problems in autobiographies written by priests**

During the 2nd world war, 30 august 1940 Northern Transylvania was connected to Hungary. In this period Reformed priests from the Reformed Diocese beyond the Tisa were asked to elaborate a series of documents connects to the religious life of their parishes. In a first step they wanted a terrier with all the data of the personal, later this was to be extended to the whole territory of Reformed dioceses. Among others an autobiography of the priests was asked for, together with relevant data about their job, communities, statistical and demographic data, information about family life, key moments in their carriers, conflicts within the communities, strategies of consolidation and development of church communities, studies, institutions beside the church, problems caused by minority life concerning nationality, confession etc.

I analyzed more than 800 documents. I chose to interpret the ones which were connected to the Diaspora phenomenon and some historical, social, judicial events which favored the accentuation of this phenomenon.

### **Conclusions**

As a conclusion we can state that the notion *Diaspora* commonly used in the Reformed church differs from the original one taken from the history of Israel, where only those persons were included who had been taken to exile in Babylon. These persons were in fact the members of the superior classes.

The Reformed Diaspora included persons from all social classes, even if we are interested only towards Diaspora communities in Romania in the 19th century or Diaspora communities remaining in Transylvania and becoming Romanian citizens in the 20th century.

Historical events did not give the chance for at least a generation to Reformed communities to reorganize themselves, to rebuild inside, so the process of degradation was continuous. Therefore many, a century ago flourishing communities reached a final

phase of their existence; in many places churches remained as monuments witnessing the once existence of this community.

Though there existed initiatives to defend in an institutional manner these communities, rarely deeds followed the words. Politicians, priests, laics, historians, sociologists showed to be interested in the problem, but a common and efficient strategy never succeeded.

The leaders of these communities however, through their personal efforts did a lot in order to protect Diaspora communities

The basic problem is that nowadays Diaspora situation persists in many communities, but young priest generations are not being trained for this activity.

On the basis of the collected material the leadership of the Reformed church is invited to elaborate viable strategies and to pay special attention in the formation of young generations, which need to become experts in coordinating, conserving and developing these communities in those places where such an endeavor is still possible.

**Keywords:**

**Reformed church, Diaspora, minority, mission, exile, assimilation, tradition, reformed school, Diaspora communities, autobiography of reformed priest.**